

# Remake Scarcity or Desire?

July 8, 2013

Costas Panayotakis' *Remaking Scarcity* is a bold attempt to combine the analysis of the ecological limits of capitalism with the call for "economic democracy." A work that is both topical (with frequent discussion of contemporary developments such as the Arab Spring and the crisis in Greece) and scholarly, the book unfolds as a series of overlapping discussions on four key themes: scarcity, inequality, democracy, and ecological crisis. The main analytical focus on the book, however, is on the question of scarcity and why traditional Marxist and allied notions that scarcity is particular to capitalism are incorrect. Building from his analysis of scarcity, Panayotakis continues to examine the ways that capitalism's lack of democracy exacerbates inequality as well as the global ecological crisis.

In what is an engaging but also, ultimately, frustrating argument, Panayotakis attempts to demonstrate that only through a turn to economic democracy can we address the inequalities and destructive tendencies of capitalism. Although there is little reason to disagree with this normative stand in favor of greater democracy, the analysis leading up to this conclusion contains enough gaps that it raises more questions than it answers. In particular, there are two sets of issues that, in my opinion, are not sufficiently or conclusively analyzed in the book: the question of desire and subjectivity and the question of the efficiency of democracy. Rather than simply give a synopsis of the book, the rest of this review engages with these two issues and highlights what may be substantive issues that need further debate and conceptual development in order to better tie together the question of ecological crisis and democracy.

A central lynchpin in Panayotakis' argument is his rejection of the idea that scarcity is a product of capitalism. In opposition to most Marxists as well as such allied thinkers as Marshall Sahlins, Panayotakis claims that scarcity is, potentially at least, to be found in all societies, not only capitalist societies. In opposition to the well-known arguments of Baran and Sweezy on the need to overcome scarcity, Panayotakis notes:

... Is it impossible to imagine that even in a post-capitalist society there would be a greater desire, among people, to travel around the world than would be consistent with the ecological limits we have to respect? Any anti-capitalist from the global North who enjoys flying to Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe would have to admit that in a post-capitalist society they would have no more right to do that than the billions of people from the global South who would also love to do that but can currently not afford an airplane ticket (29).

If we take it as a given that people will desire more than they have or more than can reasonably be accommodated for all, then economic democracy becomes a necessity, according to the logic of the argument, for dealing with the inherent limits to consumption, how to produce and/or divide up the inherently limited amount of this or that good.

Part of the problem, I believe, is that Panayotakis takes any case of need as a matter of scarcity. Most notably, he cites the need for Sahlins' hunters and gatherers to move around, to be mobile in their search for game, as an example that they also were faced with scarcity. All societies have needs but is it the case that all societies have known scarcity? The point of Sahlins, and many others, is that the question of scarcity is a cultural one. If Sahlins' hunters and gatherers, as a society, had all they desired then there is no scarcity as we know it. Having to move, for example, is not a problem if they did not desire to not be mobile. Similarly, if a Manhattan millionaire has an eighteen-foot wide townhome but desires a twenty-five foot wide one, there is scarcity. It may be useful to recall that

the notion of scarcity as explicated within liberal thought was a matter of human nature; we always desire to have more than we do, to become better off. Human beings are utility maximizers. Because we all tend to have similar appetites, to desire similar things (traveling by plane or ever wider townhouses), scarcity will be inherent within society. In other words, what Sahlins attempts to overcome is the ahistorical and essentialist understanding of human nature that liberalism has put forward. It is not only Sahlins that deserves mention here, a whole plethora of studies — from Bourdieu's study of honor in Algerian villages to Ranciere's study of 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian cobblers to Marcuse's study of one-dimensional man, to, most importantly here, Henri Lefebvre's work on the ways that our bureaucratic societies create needs — have attempted to show the particularity of the ways that needs and desires are produced in bourgeois societies and to contrast that with other possible values and motivations.

Panayotakis basically follows the liberal position that scarcity is inherent to human nature. It is not that he conforms or does not conform to some political principle; it is that he takes the question of desire and subjectivity as fixed, a matter of human nature and individual taste. The desire for more is a given but some people might desire more coffee, some more free time, some faster cars, and so on. Economic democracy would allow us to make decisions about how best to allocate our efforts and resources given what will be, inherently, conflicting and competing demands and preferences upon inherently limited resources.

Although Panayotakis is not unaware of the literature on how needs are produced in capitalist societies, he stops short of highlighting the creation of desire as a fundamental question. Instead, his main category of contention is what he terms "configurations of scarcity," the ways that scarcity is organized in the society. According to Panayotakis, the high degree of inequality that capitalism produces could be overcome through economic democracy, matters of production and consumption being decided collectively. In part, he argues, this would help overturn the consumerist desire in contemporary societies since it is a product of the inequality and alienation of capitalism and will become much less pronounced if people are relieved of this anxiety (49-56). Similarly, the great ecological destruction that modern industry has produced could be overcome by this move to democracy since externality costs would be taken more seriously and could not be displaced onto someone else: people would certainly be less likely to make decisions that destroy their own cities and communities. Human beings, Panayotakis argues, could finally rethink success not in terms of consumption levels but, rather, by forming lasting communal bonds and participating in political life:

"Abandoning consumerism is not a regrettable but necessary sacrifice. It is an opportunity to redefine the "good life" by shifting emphasis from material possessions to the cultivation of human relationships that, as the literature on happiness confirms, is the true key to humanness" (111).

How will human beings be transformed from the possessive individualism of liberalism? Simply by transforming the power relations within the workplace? Moreover, is not happiness also the goal of liberalism? Are we keeping the goals but simply modifying some of the means of attaining it? I am reminded of a discussion I had some years ago in one of the reclaimed factories in Buenos Aires. I asked a few of the workers if they preferred not having a boss; the answer was that they would prefer to not have the obligation of having to run the factory. They would greatly prefer to have a boss who would pay them on time and to be saved from all the worries and obligations: working long hours, hosting parties in the factory for extra cash, a constant struggling to find new customers. What did they desire? To be happy? Is happiness a revolutionary or, even, democratic goal? What is missing in the analysis is an understanding of how the liberal subjectivity is created and what a democratic one would look like. How can we produce the type of people who value autonomy over comfort and commodious living? What type of human being do we need to produce so that they can be satisfied in ways that go beyond the market? How can the liberal desire be undone so that people actually want democracy? Similarly, why limit the discussion to matters of "economic" democracy,

why should the realm of needs hold pride of place over the political moment?

This leads us to the second element of the book that needs explication, economic democracy as a more efficient solution to the problems of production and material needs. For Panayotakis, the virtue of economic democracy is that it is more efficient than market mechanisms. Drawing upon arguments from David Schweickart as well as Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, Panayotakis goes through a long list of reasons on why various possible versions of economic democracy (democratic planning, participatory economies, etc.) are more efficient both in terms of being less wasteful in the use of raw materials as well as in terms of ecological damage and of engendering greater effort and responsibility in workers (114-128). The problem here, not unrelated to the previous point on the production of new subjectivities, is that economic measures are used as a justification for a democratic politics. Democracy is not presented here as a necessary element in the production of autonomous human beings, as the only way a free community can be constituted, but, rather, as something that is good for production. The political moment is reduced to little more than an adjunct to the realm of needs, the production of economic goods.

Taking these questions together, the need for a less economistic understanding of the necessity of democracy and the need for a deeper analysis of how desire and subjectivity are created and what types of desire are appropriate for a democratic society, point to the necessity of going beyond the framework that Panayotakis discusses and engaging with such authors as Henri Lefebvre, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Herbert Marcuse against the categories of economic man. The promise of democracy and the need for a new type of desire are fundamental questions and cannot be left to those thinkers who remain bound by the categories of political economy. Although Panayotakis succeeds in provoking us to think about the relationship between the ecological question and the necessity of democracy, the book stops short of providing the full range of ideas and arguments necessary to think that connection. We can only look forward to future efforts that extend the problematic that Panayotakis establishes in *Remaking Scarcity* and which lead us closer to understanding why it takes a democratic community to fully address the antinomies of our social and natural worlds.

Editors' note: See [here](#) for a rejoinder by Costas Panayotakis.